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Atari Online News, Etc.
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A-ONE #1021 05/23/08

~ OLPC Program Resumes! ~ People Are Talking! ~ Firefox 3 In Test!
~ Phishing Scheme Busted ~ Google Health Is Live! ~ HP Is Going Green!
~ E-mail, How Safe Is It ~ Hold Off Google Health ~ Ready for Windows 7?

~ Greenpeace Wants Green ~ Nintendo Issues Apology ~ Kids' Net Scrutiny!

-* EU To Scrutinize Microsoft! *-
-* Could Google "Muck Up" Yahoo Deal? *-
-* Yahoo Postpones Shareholders Meeting Again *-

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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Ahhhh, the unofficial start of summer! It's a great time of the year, as far as I'm concerned (weather-permitting!). Cookouts, beer, cookouts, beer, cookouts...you get the picture! And yes, I'll be getting a number of annual projects done over the weekend, as well. Time to get my vegetable gardens prepped, the swimming pool opened, gardens planned, and the like. One of my favorite Memorial Day weekend activities!

But additionally, let's not forget the real reason behind the celebration of Memorial Day. While most of us are grillin' and drinkin', we should also be remembering our fallen soldiers of wars gone by, as well as any of the current conflicts that this country is involved. Those lost while in the armed services should be honored - they gave their lives to protect all that we believe in and for the freedoms that we're able to experience in this country.

And then, I hope that you enjoy the long holiday weekend as much as I will!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Well folks, another week has come and gone, spring has sprung, and we're smack-dab up against Memorial Day.

Please take a few moments over the weekend to stop and think about what Memorial Day really is... a day to remember and honor those who've given their lives serving in the military. Whether you agree with past or present military actions, please remember that it's not about right or wrong, and it's not about whether you or I agree with whatever action happens to be going on. It's about service to one's country. It's about protecting not only the boundaries and borders of our country, but the giving of one's self to something larger... something

grander than just "Me".

Now, I'm not going to argue about what we should or shouldn't be doing out there in the world today... that's got nothing to do with Memorial Day. If you read this column with any regularity, you know what my opinions are. But if you know someone who gave their life in the Service, pause for a moment and think about their sacrifice. If you happen to run into or meet up with someone who served in the military, just take a moment to say 'thank you'. And if you know someone who's serving NOW, say a prayer to whatever God or spiritual entity you might believe in that they might be kept safe.

On the other side of the coin, it's important to remember that the military is not the only way to serve one's country. As far as I'm concerned, anyone who serves anyone else is worthy of our respect. That covers just about all of us, and that's probably the way it should be. Maybe it's just because when you make everyone special you make no one special, but I don't think that most people who serve to save or protect us get the recognition that they deserve. Think about all the people who's job it is to keep you safe (police), get you out of harm's way (fire/rescue), or just make your life easier (everyone from gas station attendants to the guy who bags your groceries at the supermarket) and, even if just for a few fleeting seconds, say thank you.

And if you happen to be lucky enough to be going to a party this weekend, please don't drink and drive. You know what they say: The life you save may be MINE! [grin]

Well, let's get on with the news, hints tips and info from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup

On the subject of the EtherNat ethernet connector and it's USP ports, Gotz Hoffart posts:

"First one has to be a lucky boy to own an Ethernat. I do not, unfortunately.

I hope that the USB driver situation will be a bit more planned and organized compared to the TCP/IP-stack-world ... worlds."

Dave Wade tells Gotz:

"I think its already too late... One per OS perhaps..."

Jean-Luc Ceccoli adds:

"So, once again, we've been fooled! We bought a device that reveals totally unusable for non-MiNT users and partly usable only for MiNT ones... I think I'll never trust anymore anyone else than Rodolphe for anything to be added to the Falcon. At least, he ensured his products would work fine on every common OS people run."

’Phantomm’ throws out his own opinion (which I agree with):

"In my opinion, any device that relies on using another OS such as Mint, will not advance the Atari platform. This only makes the number of users of advance hardware smaller.

I think anyone who wants to develop hardware and or software, should develop for the whole or most of the platform. So that new users can pick it up easy.

Most people simply don’t have or don’t want to take the time to install another OS so that they can run a piece of hardware.

We needed USB support for along time now as well as other things to keep the platform going. If possible, stick with developing items that will work with TOS and the whole platform will benefit."

’PeP’ tells Phantomm:

"Problem is it doesn’t work like that. The FreeMiNT kernel has proper support for device drivers, whereas TOS and MagiC has not. This, and the fact that it’s a good idea to keep APIs etc. similar to that of the unix-world in general, means the preferred way of writing device drivers for FreeMiNT differs significantly from that of the other two.

This doesn’t mean there can’t be compatibility. A good example is the STiK API vs. MiNTNet, where compatibility has been solved by means of a wrapper daemon.

An aspect that people seem to forget is that while all these OS:s sport the same user application compatibility, they don’t share the same functionality or features internally. The FreeMiNT kernel and recent AES:s has functionality not found in legacy systems like TOS/ MagiC, and it is sometimes difficult to write stuff without using this functionality. What complicates things even more is that MagiC costs cash (still), which means you can’t even test your stuff without having to pay for something which is A: essentially dead and B: you don’t want to use anyway. As a user however, you have the option to support the ongoing development by using stuff that is being actively developed, including the OS."

Jo Even Skarstein adds;

"MagiC has proper support for device drivers, although it looks to me that it offloads a lot more work to the driver (and the developer!) than the API used in MiNT. It also has support for loadable filesystems similar to MiNT’s, but I don’t know the details. They’re not binary compatible though, that’s for sure.

MiNT-Net and MagiXnet-drivers used to be binary compatible though. I’m not sure why they’re not compatible now, as the XIF-interface doesn’t appear to have changed in MiNT-net. There might be some other reason why this particular driver doesn’t work with MagiC.

Using new features AND be compatible with MagiC means adding lots of code to emulate the new features under MagiC. This means wasted time and efforts, which we really can’t afford with the small number of developers left.

I'd like to test my stuff under MagiC, but will wait until some sends me a free copy of MagiC-Milan ;-) I already have a legal copy of MagiC 6.1, but that one doesn't work on the Milan."

Phantomm now posts this about Nova and Vortex cards and other associated stuff:

"I have found some time to look at the Vortex and Nova.
Here is some info on the Vortex 386SX that may help.

To start the Vortex 386SX with the default values you have to start the program ATONCE.PRG from GEM. You should see a boot-message, that gives you some info about the system configuration and you'll be asked to insert a DOS system Disk.

You will get the usual DOS prompt "A>" and you then know that it's working.

The Default settings are as follows...
One 3.5 DOS floppy drive (=internal floppy drive with then name "A".
No Hard disk.
VGA-monochrome-graphics video-emulation.
640KB DOS-Base memory.
Extended memory is 0KB.
Expanded memory is 0KB.
Atari-Mouse as Serial-Microsoft-Mouse (together with a Microsoft-compatible driver, e.g. MOUSE.SYS, version 6.10) on COM 1.
Serial interface on COM 2.
Parallel interface on LPT1.

Returning to GEM
Press the key "G" during the boot process to return to GEM Desktop.
If DOS is already loaded you can leave the AT-emulation with GEMDOS.EXE and return to the GEM DeskTop. If DOS is already loaded press the "Left Shift","Alternate", and "Undo" keys together, and you will return to the GEM Desktop.

Reset the system with the (Control, Alternate, and Delete) keys at the same time.

Skip the memory test of the 386SX by pressing the ESC key.

The INSTALL.PRG is started from the GEM Desktop. It allows the setting of all operating parameters. To use the existing components of the (ATARI) computer system, it has to be configured, this is done using the (install.prg on the Vortex system disk).

The settings are saved and stored in the (ATONCE.CFG)
There are quite a few options to select.
*Setting up the hard drive correctly is one of the most important!
(Too many details to go into here.)

*However you should be able to run the basic system using just a Floppy Disk.

There are 3 different boot- settings, (Floppy Boot, Floppy/Hard disk Boot, and Hard disk Boot).

There are several types of Floppy Disks supported...

1.44MB-2 sides-80-tracks- 3.5-format.
720KB-2 sides-80-tracks- 3.5/5.25 format.
360KB-2 sides-40-tracks- 3.5/5.25 format.
360KB-1 sides-80-tracks- 3.5/5.25 format.

With the program (INSTALL.PRG) you can determine the assignment of the Atari Floppy Drives A and B to the DOS-floppy drives A and B.

According to the manual Windows 3.0 will run in Enhanced Mode.
If you ever try to run Windows, Never Invert the EGA-Screen with the SHIFT+UNDO as it will cause Data Loss.

* When you are setting the configuration of your ATonce 386SX emulator with the INSTALL.PRG, you must not install Expanded Memory (set it to 0KB !). Assign all free memory or your (ATARI) to EXTENDED Memory!
Also the EMM.SYS driver you will find on your ATonce 386SX SystemDisk is NOT needed! (IT's is there only for compatibility reasons to other vortex emulator-products). (I'm not sure which products, but that's what the manual states).

All settings that have been done with the INSTALL.PRG will be stored in the emulator- file ATONCE.PRG as well as in the configuration-file ATONCE.CFG. If Install.prg is used another time and if changes have been made, Install.prg automatically generates a new ATONCE.CFG file. The old one will be renamed in ATONCE.OLD.

According to the manual DOS versions larger or equal 3.2 should be used mainly because of the support of 80 track floppy disks. If DOS 4.1 is to be used the 80286 variation is
available. Also according to the manual MSDOS 5.0 can be used with the Vortex 386SX. But I am sure one could probably use DOS 6.XX or better. On my FalconSpeed 286 board, I ran Win 3.1/DOS 6.22 with no problems.

FalconSpeed is a lot like the Vortex 386SX, except there seems to be some difference in the way Hard disks and partitions are used.

I also have 2 SuperCharges, I haven't used for along time, It ran off a hard drive and I still have the system, just not connected up.

I like what you did with your SuperCharger, I found a CO-Processor in an old 286-12mhz NEC that I put in my SuperCharger a few months back. The 286 is also socketed, and could be used for projects.

The MEGA STE

I looked for info on the dip settings, I have some info on it here somewhere. But for now all I could find is a diagram of the settings which to my knowledge is how they are suppose to be set with an internal hard drive.

The Blue 8 selector switch settings located on the right front forward corner, All Switches are down toward the front of the Mega STE except for (7) which is up toward the back.

The NOVA Graphics Card
I don't know if you have the manual or not.
But it stresses the importance of installing the card correctly

or damage to the card and system can occur.
Pretty much the same as with the Vortex 386SX.

Here is the order of the drivers and according to the manual
they must run before anything else.
EMULATOR.PRG
MENU.PRG
STA_VDI.PRG
STA_VDI.BIB and EMULATOR.BIB need no
particular order.
An auto folder organizer such as XBOOT, MouseBoot is very useful.

A two monitor system is very useful since you can observe the process of
booting up and the possible errors.
On a MSTE, you can have your SM124 monitor still plugged into
your monitor port.

When starting the NOVA Graphics Card, Hold down the two Shift
buttons while booting up and you'll get the NOVA MENU.
When at this Menu, its very important to set SubMenu "a" and "b".

I hope this info helps in some way.
I will check on a few other things, asap."

Guillaume Tello tells Phantomm:

"I could run again my Mega STE from the Hard Drive, connectors were not
correctly plugged I think.

With the Vortex:
- I can't run Install.PRG, two bombs! But, the same program from the
same floppy runs well on the TT. But it's useless as I want to set the
Hard drive... And partitions on the TT are not the same as on the Mega
STE.

With the NOVA:
- still not working. When I unplug the board from the Atari, I have
to pull using the connectors. I suspect this may have damaged some
connectors. I'll try to re-solder them."

Well folks, that's it for this week. Enjoy the holiday weekend, and
remember to be responsible with the... ummm... liquid refreshments...
being responsible is also a way of being of service to others.

Till next time, keep on doing what you do and keep your ears open so
you'll hear what they're saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section
  """""""""""""""""""""""""""""""

- Greenpeace Wants Greener Consoles!
- Nintendo Issues An Apology!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Nintendo Apologizes to Wii Fit Players

Nintendo has admitted that Wii Fit body fat readings may not be accurate for younger players, nor for sporty people carrying lots of muscle mass.

The platform holder was responding to criticism from British newspaper the Daily Mail, which heard from one troubled father that his young and supposedly athletic daughter had been devastated to find out she was "fat" according to the game.

He said it was the last thing she needed to hear in the face of today's stick-sized obsessiveness.

His comments prompted Tam Fry of the National Obesity Forum to declare that the "far from perfect" BMI system should "simply should not be used" with children, and that Wii Fit should at least carry a warning for parents preparing them for misleading results.

"Nintendo would like to apologize to any customers offended by the in-game terminology used to classify a player's current BMI status, as part of the BMI measurement system integrated into Wii Fit," responded Nintendo in an official statement.

"As stated in the Wii Fit manual, BMI is essentially a measure of body fat, based on an adult height and weight. Wii Fit is still capable of measuring the BMI for people aged between 2 and 20 but the resulting figures may not be entirely accurate for younger age groups due to varying levels of development.

"People with more muscle mass than normal will also have a higher BMI rating due to the heavy weight of muscle tissue, so the resulting figures should be used for reference purposes only," added the statement.

Nintendo went on to say that it was the "best generic" scale for measuring progress in its game, as the BMI system is "widely used within the medical and fitness professions".

You can also hide your on-screen weight and class yourself as a Guest so you do not have to take part in the BMI measuring process.

Wii Fit was released in Europe at the end of April and sells in shops for GBP 70 with the fancy Wii Balance Board.

We dressed Ellie up in Lycra to put it through its paces. Pop over to her Wii Fit review to find out what she thought.

Greenpeace Pushes for Greener Video Game Consoles

Greenpeace has released the results of its investigation into hazardous materials in next-generation video game consoles. The study reveals that the Nintendo Wii, Sony PlayStation 3 Elite and Microsoft Xbox 360 have all tested positive for hazardous chemicals.

The analysis of these toxic materials - polyvinyl chloride (PVC), phthalates, beryllium and bromine, which is indicative of brominated flame retardants - are contained in the organization's new report, entitled "Playing Dirty," and show that all three manufacturers failed the green-electronics test established by Greenpeace.

"Whether game consoles are classified as toys or not, they can still contain hazardous chemicals and materials that could harm humans," said Dr. Kevin Brigden of the Greenpeace Science Unit. "The technology is available for the manufacturers to design out toxins and produce greener game consoles now."

The report reveals that both the Xbox 360 and PS3 contained very high levels of phthalates that are not permitted in components of toys or childcare products sold in the European Union. One of the phthalates, DEHP, is known to interfere with sexual development in mammals -- including humans, and especially males. The other phthalate, DINP, found only in the Xbox 360, is prohibited from use in toys and childcare products in the European Union if children can place them in their mouths.

All game consoles tested positive for various hazardous chemicals. For example, high levels of bromine were found in the components of all three, with the highest by weight levels in the PS3 and the Wii. But the tests also showed that each of the manufacturers avoided or reduced the use of individual hazardous substances in certain materials within their consoles.

In the Nintendo Wii, beryllium alloys were not identified in electrical contacts, and the use of PVC and phthalates was determined to be limited. At the same time, the PS3 included examples of "bromine-free" circuit boards, and the Xbox 360 had a lower usage of brominated substances within housing materials.

"Our test clearly shows that a greener game console is possible," said Casey Harrell, a Greenpeace toxics campaigner. "By combining the best practices of each console design, we could replace most of the hazardous chemicals found in these game consoles with toxic-free materials."

The game-consoles market is one of the fastest-growing in consumer electronics, with more than 60 million sold and 14 percent growth last year, according to Datamonitor. They not only contain hazardous chemicals, but also contribute to the fastest-growing type of waste -- e-waste, according to Greenpeace. Discarded game consoles are often dumped and end up in unsafe and dirty recycling yards in developing countries, harming the environment and the health of workers.

Michal Ann Strahilevitz, Ph.D., an associate professor of marketing at Golden Gate University who studies corporate social responsibility and green consumer behavior, said a typical video game consumer is not likely to care that much about the toxins. But the companies may still

make further strides to rid their products of them, for the greater good.

"I do think a company like Microsoft, that has made major steps toward carbon neutrality, and has invested a great deal in sustainability across the company, will likely do what they can to reduce any toxic materials in their portion of this market," Strahilevitz said.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Microsoft-Yahoo Talks Driven by Specter of Icahn, Google

Just two weeks after breaking off merger talks, Microsoft Corp. and Yahoo Inc. have been pulled back to the bargaining table by their fears about what might happen if they don't work out a deal.

For now, Microsoft and Yahoo are still dancing around the edges as they explore possible business arrangements without melding the two companies.

The notion of a half-baked deal didn't excite investors Monday as they got their first chance to react to Sunday's news that Microsoft and Yahoo are talking again.

But most analysts remain convinced the preliminary talks will culminate in Microsoft buying Yahoo for somewhere between $33 to $37 per share, a price that translates to $47.5 billion to $53 billion.

Both Microsoft and Yahoo issued statements Sunday acknowledging they haven't ruled out the possibility of a merger even though they aren't discussing one now.

Although their discussions fell apart this month in a disagreement over price, both Yahoo and Microsoft have powerful incentives to reach a compromise within the next few weeks.

If Yahoo doesn't stop demanding $37 per share, its board could be overthrown in a shareholder mutiny led by activist investor Carl Icahn.

To pressure Yahoo into reviving the talks, he has nominated an alternate slate of 10 directors scheduled to stand for election at Yahoo's July 3 annual meeting. Icahn didn't respond to a request for comment Monday.

Meanwhile, Microsoft's unwillingness to pay more than $33 per share created an opportunity for its nemesis, Google Inc., to enter an advertising partnership with Yahoo.

"It's becoming pretty clear that Yahoo is either going to work something out with Microsoft or do a deal with Google," said Standard & Poor's equity analyst Scott Kessler. "If Yahoo winds up with Google after all this, it would be pretty damaging to Microsoft."

Microsoft began pursuing a Yahoo takeover in late January largely as a means to counter Google's dominance of the Internet search and advertising markets.

After Microsoft pounced, Yahoo became more receptive to an idea that it had resisted in the past - allowing Google to show some of the ads alongside Yahoo's search results.

A two-week trial last month demonstrated Google's technology could help boost Yahoo's profits, and the two sides began exploring a long-term alliance. But any partnership between Google and Yahoo likely would face antitrust obstacles because the two companies control more than 80 percent of the U.S. search advertising market.

A similar deal between Yahoo and Microsoft wouldn't pose the same antitrust problems because Google still would control more than half the market.

"We believe that a core issue for Microsoft is to acquire Yahoo on friendly terms," UBS analyst Benjamin Schachter wrote in a Monday research note. "A near-term deal (in search) could act as an intermediate step that would go a long way toward testing the waters."

Microsoft also might buy key pieces of Yahoo's online operations instead of doing a search advertising partnership or acquiring the entire company, Collins Stewart analyst Sanded Aggarwal said in a Monday research note. He values Yahoo's search technology at $21 billion, its display advertising service at $14 billion and its Internet holdings outside the United States at $9.25 billion.

Yahoo Chief Executive Jerry Yang believes the Sunnyvale-based company is on the verge of a turnaround that will prove it's worth more $50 billion. Starting next year, he has promised Yahoo's net revenue will increase by 25 percent annually - more than doubling its recent rate of growth.

But Icahn, who owns a 4.3 percent stake in Yahoo, so far has indicated he isn't willing to wait until next year. And many other major shareholders appear ready to back him.

Kessler doubts Yahoo will be able to placate its shareholders by entering a partnership with Google, particularly if the alliance could hurt Yahoo in the long run by subverting its own technology in the critical search advertising market.

"It's almost a no-win situation for Yahoo because they aren't going to get sufficient time to prove they are worth $33 per share or more," Kessler said.

Yahoo Postpones Shareholder Meeting Again, Director Resigns

Yahoo Inc. is postponing its shareholder meeting for a second time, now that billionaire investor Carl Icahn has nominated alternate candidates to Yahoo's existing board of directors.

Sunnyvale, Calif.-based Yahoo put off the meeting once to buy time to

consider an unsolicited buyout offer from Microsoft Corp.

Yahoo disclosed in a Securities and Exchange Commission filing on Thursday that its July 3 meeting would be delayed. The company expects to set a date that is closer to the end of July.

In a second filing, Yahoo said Edward Kozel, a board member, is resigning. Kozel had planned to step down in February, but stayed on after Microsoft made its offer in January.

Firefox 3 Release Candidate Rolls Out To Testers

Mozilla has rolled out Firefox 3 release candidate 1 to testers in advance of a full release in the weeks ahead. According to the program's developers, RC1 features more than 14,000 updates, "including some major re-architecting to provide improved performance, stability, rendering correctness, and code simplification and sustainability."

Though the latest Firefox release has been dubbed a "public preview," it is primarily aimed at the developer community. So anyone who downloads RC1 should expect a few glitches.

For example, some Firefox 2 plug-ins are not compatible with RC1. Moreover, when Yahoo pages are loaded, images and other page elements are replaced by generic icons. On the other hand, the browser displays pristine pages from popular sites such as The New York Times portal.

Firefox 3's new auto-complete feature enables users to access a list of the matches gleaned from their recent Web-surfing history and bookmarked pages. The browser matches "what you're typing - even multiple words - against the URLs, page titles, and tags in your bookmarks and history, returning results sorted by 'frecency' - an algorithm combining frequency + recency," noted Mozilla blogger Deb Richardson.

Firefox 3 also introduces three new bookmark features called stars, tags and smart folders. "Bookmark stars are a quick and easy way to bookmark a page with a single click," Richardson wrote. "If you click the star again, it opens the Bookmark dialog," giving users the ability to edit the title, add tags, file the bookmark in a folder, or delete the bookmark.

By contrast, the new tags feature enables users to add extra information to a bookmark. "Where folders let you organize bookmarks in a way, they're limited in that you can only put each bookmark in a single folder," Richardson explained. "Not so with tags - you can add as many tags to a bookmark as you want."

Smart folders are basically saved searches that automatically update whenever users add new items matching previous searches to their bookmarks, Richardson noted. "So if I create a 'soup recipes' smart bookmark folder, any time I add a bookmark that has 'soup' and 'recipes' in the title or tag, it will automatically be added to my 'soup recipes' folder," she explained.

Several security enhancements to Firefox 3 promise to improve the overall user experience. For example, the browser automatically warns PC users whenever they visit Web pages that are known to install viruses,

spyware, Trojans or malware, and refrains from displaying the content on Web pages that are suspected to be phisher Web forgeries.

To check a Web site’s authenticity, Web surfers can click on the favicon button on the location bar to find out who owns the site and check if the connection is protected from eavesdropping. Even better, the browser’s favicon button turns green when pages are being accessed that use extended validation SSL certificates, which site operators can obtain only after vetting by an established certificate authority.

Mozilla developers also say improvements to the browser’s JavaScript engine, together with the introduction of profile-guided optimization, speed up the browser’s page-loading performance. "Compared to Firefox 2, web applications like Google Mail and Zoho Office run twice as fast in Firefox 3," they said.

Laptop-for-Kids Project Resumes Donation Program

The One Laptop Per Child project plans to resume its Give One Get One program, in which people spend $400 to buy one of the nonprofit’s rugged computers and donate a second one to a child in a developing country.

Nicholas Negroponte, the founder of the laptop group, announced the return of the donor program Tuesday as he disclosed plans for a second generation of the "XO" computers. By 2010 Negroponte hopes to unveil a smaller, more energy-efficient version with two touch screens and a price closer to the long-term goal of $100. Negroponte said his new target is $75.

For now the group has sold about 600,000 XOs, which cost $188. About 162,000 of them sold in the first round of Give One Get One, which ran in November and December. Negroponte said the program brought laptops to countries that couldn’t have afforded to buy the computers themselves for their residents, including Haiti and Afghanistan.

The second run of the donor program is expected to begin around the end of the summer and be open to buyers in Europe and the United States.

One Laptop Per Child recently announced a partnership with Microsoft Corp. that will enable international governments to choose a Linux or Windows operating system on XOs they buy. But buyers in Give One Get One might not be able to opt for Windows unless the nonprofit and Microsoft work out a licensing arrangement.

Are You Ready for Windows 7?

"Hold the line!" That’s the new rallying cry for the core Windows development team. Add new features. Tweak existing ones. But whatever you do, don’t make Windows 7 any slower or fatter than Vista."Hold the line!" That’s the new rallying cry for the core Windows development team. Add new features. Tweak existing ones. But whatever you do, don’t make Windows 7 any slower or fatter than Vista.

I have little doubt those are the marching orders for Windows 7, given

the tight release timeframe of 18 to 24 months plus various reports of early Milestone builds. More ambitious changes would risk another -- and potentially fatal - Longhorn-style delay. Windows 7 will be exactly what the internal Microsoft working title conveys: the seventh (actually fifth) generation of the Windows NT code base - the same code base that forms the basis of Windows XP and Vista today.

Shocking? Only if you're one of the deluded Save XP die-hards who bought into the whole Windows 7 uber alles mystique. For these lost souls, the next Windows is more than just another version. It's a true panacea, a conduit through which they can pour all of their anti-Vista angst. Don't like UAC? Windows 7 will fix that. Frustrated by Vista's sluggish performance? Windows 7 will run circles around it.

Reality check: Windows 7 will be a lot like Vista. In fact, it'll be more like an extensive Service Pack (think Windows XP SP2 and/or the various NT Option Packs of yore) than a major new release. Big ideas and big new features are what got Microsoft into the whole "Longhorn reset" mess in the first place.

This is actually a good thing. Despite the criticisms leveled against it (including more than one heated diatribe by yours truly), Vista isn't really flawed in any fundamental way. Yes, it's slower than XP - but that was to be expected given its more complex code paths. Likewise, the "girth" issues were somewhat inevitable. Meanwhile, the hardware base is slowly catching up to where it needs to be to support a more complex Windows OS.

I'd even go so far as to say that, if Vista were launched today - with the SP1 tweaks and improved device driver ecosystem in place - it would fare a lot better than it did. But hindsight is 20/20. The future, in the form of Windows 7, is all about shipping an incremental follow-on to Vista that shores up the NT code base once and for all.

The good news is that this also makes speculating about the next version's runtime behavior a lot easier. After all, if Windows 7 is just Windows Vista with some performance and usability tweaks, it means we can deduce a lot about the product's system requirements and compatibility with the installed base by examining performance and usage data collected from systems running its immediate predecessors, Windows "5" (also known as XP) and "6" (also known as Vista).

Kids' Net Access Gets Close Scrutiny From Symantec

Symantec is developing a Web-based service that will let parents control almost all aspects of their child's Internet activity from anywhere in the world.

The rising use of instant-messaging programs and social-networking sites by children has posed new challenges to parents seeking to prevent kids' access to inappropriate content or contact with creepy online adults.

A demo seen by IDG on Friday showed the application gives parents sweeping control over their child's activity.

It can be configured so a parent must approve adding a new person to a buddy list on an instant-messaging program. Search terms can be

monitored as well as content posted on social-networking sites.

The application doesn’t have a formal product name as of yet, said Con Mallon, product marketing director for Symantec’s consumer division in Europe, on Friday. Symantec is terming it a "family online safety" program rather than the more negative term of "parental control."

Symantec plans to emphasize that parents and their children can collaborate on the limits they want to set for Internet access, Mallon said.

The program is Web-based and can be access through a Web browser, so parents have control even if they’re not at home. After logging in, parents can click on a tab labeled "news" and see a list of recent actions by their child.

Those actions can include the creation of a new profile on MySpace, the last person the child sent an instant message to, a transcript of that conversation, the Web sites the child has either access or tried to access and the length of time online, among other metrics.

A client program must be installed on the PC the child uses, and actions done by the child on another PC can’t be monitored, Mallon said.

Symantec hasn’t decided how to market the program just yet. It could be wrapped into one of the company’s security suites or sold as a stand-alone subscription service, Mallon said.

The application was rolled out within the last two weeks for Symantec employees, Mallon said. It will then be offered on a forthcoming Web site called the "Incubator" that Symantec plans to launch within the next two months.

That Web site will host programs that are "two steps before beta" for the public to test, Mallon said. After that, the family online safety application will go into beta, he said. A commercial release is planned before the end of March 2009.

EU To Scrutinise Microsoft’s Promise To Open Up Office

The European Commission said on Thursday it would scrutinise a decision by Microsoft to make its Office programme compatible with a rival document format.

With the US software giant embroiled in an antitrust standoff with Europe’s top antitrust watchdog, the company said on Wednesday that Office would support the competing Open Document Format (ODF) from the first half of 2009.

In a short reaction, the commission said that it had "taken note" of the announcement and would "welcome any step that Microsoft took towards genuine interoperability, more consumer choice and less vendor lock-in."

It added that it "will investigate whether the announced support of ODF in Office leads to better interoperability and allows consumers to process and exchange their documents with the software product of their choice."

The European Commission has long accused Microsoft of abusing its dominant market power by making software that is incompatible with products made by its rivals.

In September, Microsoft lost an appeal before Europe’s second-highest court against a fine of nearly 500 million euros (788 million dollars) that EU regulators slapped on the company in 2004 for abusing its dominant market power.

Since its court victory, the European Commission has launched a new investigation targetting the interoperability of a broad range of software, including Microsoft’s popular Office package, with rival products.

In February, the commission hit Microsoft with a further fine of 899 million euros for defying its 2004 ruling. Microsoft has lodged an appeal against the decision.

Announcing the company’s latest move, Microsoft senior vice president Chris Capossela said: "We are committed to providing Office users with greater choice among document formats and enhanced interoperability."

EU Competition Commission Neelie Kroes said that the commission was in "close contact" with Microsoft both on a technical level and with its management.

"They are aware what they have to deliver," Kroes told journalists on the sidelines of a conference in Slovenia.

The European Committee for Interoperable Systems, a group of Microsoft rivals including tech giants like IBM, Nokia and Oracle, said Microsoft’s announcement marked "steps in the right direction" but were "not nearly enough."

"A closer look at their substance suggests that Microsoft is still playing for time to further consolidate its super-dominant position, and that continued anti-trust vigilance will be necessary," ECIS spokesman Thomas Vinje said.

He described Microsoft’s target of supporting ODF by the first half of 2009 as "pretty underwhelming."

Rethinking Your E-mail Protection Strategies

How safe is your incoming e-mail? With phishing, viruses, worms, Trojan Horses, spam, data storage challenges, disruption and downtime risks, data loss and leakage concerns and a host of other potential e-mail obstacles (is your head spinning yet?), it could be time to rethink your e-mail protection strategy.

The bottom line: you must safeguard your network in order to adhere to compliance mandates.

Amateur hour is over. Just when malware design seemed to have reached a plateau, new attack techniques have burst forth. Some are so complex they could have only been designed by means of sophisticated research

and development.

We spoke about the challenges this type of malware presents with experts at a number of software security and threat-management companies, including Sophos, AppRiver, and IronPort Systems, now part of Cisco Systems.

For a time, one expert pointed out, security controls designed to manage malware were working. But, as a result of this success, the threats they protected against were forced to change. In 2007, many of these threats underwent significant adaptation. Malware went stealth, and its sophistication increased. E-mail is a primary vector.

"E-mail is a challenge from a security perspective because everybody's doors are open," said Pat Peterson, vice president of Technology at IronPort Systems. "Anybody who wants to deliver mail to your server and ultimately to the desktop can do so as long as the get through your anti-spam and anti-virus scans. That's one of the fundamental and unique problems with e-mail compared to the Web or the telephone."

End users still fall for social engineering gimmicks that compel them to click on a link promising something interesting. That links ushers them to a Web site that downloads malicious payloads. It's the network administrator's responsibility to make sure that payload can't make its way to the desktop and subsequently infect the network.

Sophos reports 51 percent of e-mail that links to Web sites is infected with downloadable spyware. Simply by clicking the link and opening the browser window, the desktop is infected - unless there is some protection in place to block the malicious payload. It's not just spoofed Web sites network admins need to worry about either; 80 percent of sites that deliver malicious payload are legitimate sites that hackers compromised for their evil deeds, Sophos reported.

"Administrator jobs have become increasingly difficult because there are aspects of human resource activity that they are now expected to participate in, like personal use of the Web and blocking online gaming and instant messaging through unapproved clients," said Ron O'Brien, a senior security analyst at Sophos. "E-mail is the tip of the iceberg when it comes to overall desktop security, but it's a major weak spot."

CIOs should keep their eyes open for what IronPort's Peterson describes as blended threats. A blended threat is when malicious hackers use e-mail in conjunction with another protocol, such as the Web or media players, to do their dirty work. This is the typical social engineering type spam with enticing headlines that lure users to a Web site with the malicious payload O'Brien outlined. E-mail may also link to supposed Window Media Players, Real Players or Shockwave Players to accomplish the same mission. When the user installs the software to watch the video, the malware is executed.

"There is no silver bullet to stopping blended threats," Peterson said. "But there are best practices. E-mail reputation is one of them." Reputation filters aim to provide the outer layer of spam protection in the e-mail infrastructure. According to IronPort, reputation filters dispose of up to 80 percent of incoming spam at the connection level by determining the legitimacy of the e-mail sender. If a particular server has a reputation for sending malicious or spam e-mails, the filters block its delivery. By combining reputation filters with content filters, the bulk of unwanted e-mail is banned.

"We also want to look at the link inside the e-mail and where it takes the end user," Peterson explained. "Technology can determine where the Web site the e-mail links to is hosted, when it was registered, who the registrant is, if their contact information seems legitimate and the DNS infrastructure that supports it. That’s telling because there are criminal-friendly services out there."

AppRiver also suggests a multi-layered approach. Since different e-mail threats take different approaches, rethinking e-mail protection strategies means looking at all the angles and guarding against each one simultaneously, according to Fred Touchette, chief security analyst at AppRiver.

"Malicious hackers are professional. They try to break the protection and they test their attacks against anti-virus companies to see if they can break through," Touchette said. "However, you have to be careful not to tighten the screws to the point that you get a high percentage of false positives."

Touchette makes a valid point. A certain percentage of false positives are inevitable, of course. The solution is to block the most obviously malicious spam completely and bounce the questionable messages into a folder for manual review. You can also implement content-based rules that allow certain words like "breast" only when followed by "cancer research." This will block out pornographic e-mails while preserving legitimate e-mails at a pharmaceutical company, for example.

"It’s like Dickens said, ’it’s the best of times and the worst of times’," O’Brien concluded. "It’s the best of times because technology is making all of our jobs so much easier. But with that ease of use comes an associated risk and greater responsibilities for the network administrator to manage that risk. E-mail is at the forefront of those risks, and the threats aren’t going away."

38 in US, Romania Charged in Phishing Schemes

Thirty-eight people in the U.S. and Romania have been charged in two indictments alleging they used complicated Internet phishing schemes to steal thousands of credit and debit card numbers, U.S. and Romanian authorities announced Monday.

The indictments, in U.S. District Court for the Central District of California and the District of Connecticut, focus on two related phishing schemes with ties to organized crime, the U.S. Department of Justice said. Phishing involves sending e-mail messages that look like official correspondents from banks or credit card vendors in an attempt to get recipients to go to a fake Web site and enter their account numbers.

A grand jury in Los Angeles charged 33 people for their alleged participation in a scheme that targeted thousands of individual victims and hundreds of financial institutions. The 65-count indictment was unsealed Monday. Seven people were charged in a Connecticut indictment for their roles in an Internet phishing scheme, including two who were charged in the Los Angeles case.

U.S. authorities were acting on nine arrest warrants in the Los Angeles area and Romanian authorities acting on search warrants there Monday in connection with the racketeering indictments.

Among the charges in the Los Angeles indictments are conspiracy to violate the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act; conspiracy in connection with access devices; unauthorized access to a protected computer; bank fraud; and aggravated identity theft.

The RICO conspiracy charge carries a maximum prison sentence of 20 years, bank fraud has a maximum sentence of 30 years, and device fraud conspiracy has a maximum sentence of seven and a half years. The unauthorized access count carries a maximum prison sentence of five years, and aggravated identify theft carries a mandatory two-year prison sentence.

The Romanian members of the organization obtained thousands of credit and debit card accounts and other personal information through phishing, according to the indictment. The group sent more than 1.3 million spam e-mail messages in one phishing attack, the DOJ said.

The Romanians collected the victims' information and sent the data to cashiers in the U.S. through Internet chat messages, the DOJ said. The U.S. cashiers used hardware called encoders to record the fraudulently obtained information onto the magnetic strips on the back of credit and debit cards. Cashiers then directed other criminals called runners to test the fraudulent cards by checking balances or withdrawing small amounts of money at ATMs.

The cards that were successfully tested were used to withdraw money from ATMs or point-of-sale terminals with the highest withdrawal limits, the DOJ said. Part of the money was then wire transferred to the supplier in Romania.

Seuong Wook Lee, a cashier in the scheme, pleaded guilty on May 15 in U.S. District Court in Los Angeles to racketeering conspiracy, bank fraud, access device fraud and unauthorized access of a protected computer, the DOJ said.

In the related Connecticut case, seven Romanian resident were charged in an indictment returned by a grand jury in New Haven on Jan. 18 and unsealed Friday. The indictment alleges the defendants used a phishing scheme to commit fraud in connection with access devices, conspiracy to commit bank fraud and aggravated identity theft.

The Connecticut investigation came from a state resident's complaint about a fraudulent e-mail message made to appear as if it originated from Connecticut-based People's Bank. The e-mail message directed victims to a computer in Minnesota that had been compromised and used to host a counterfeit People's Bank Internet site.

Investigators found that the defendants had targeted several banks and other companies, including Citibank, Capital One and PayPal.

On April 23, U.S. Attorney General Michael Mukasey announced a strategy to combat international organized crime.

"Criminals who exploit the power and convenience of the Internet do not recognize national borders; therefore our efforts to prevent their attacks cannot end at our borders either," Deputy Attorney General Mark

Filip said in a statement. "Through cooperation with our international partners, we can disrupt and dismantle these enterprises, just as we have done today with these indictments and arrests."

HP Puts Green Labels on Black-and-white Printers

Hewlett-Packard has set ambitious goals to improve the energy efficiency of its printers and use more recycled materials in their manufacture--and it intends to draw buyers' attention to the features with a new Eco Highlights labeling plan.

Despite all the work that HP is doing to reduce the environmental impact of its printers, though, the biggest problem is the paper itself, according to Klaus Hieronymi of HP's Environmental Business Management Organization.

Around two-thirds of the carbon-dioxide emissions caused by printing are due to the manufacturing of the paper, he said, suggesting that the simplest way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from printing activities is to use less paper.

That's the motive for HP's focus on enabling duplex printing by default in its printer management software - and for setting another ambitious goal of having 80 percent of printing in its own offices done on both sides of the paper, according to Bill DeLacy, general manager of HP's Imaging and Printing Group for Europe, Middle East and Africa.

HP still thinks that reducing the carbon emissions of the printers themselves can make a difference, and hopes to draw customers' attention to it with its Eco Highlights labels. Although these are intended to aid in comparison shopping for environmental benefits, this is solely an HP initiative: The company is not working with any other printer manufacturers to introduce comparable labeling, said DeLacy.

The company will introduce the labels on four printers: the Deskjet D2545 color inkjet and the LaserJet P4015x, P4515x and P4515xm black-and-white laser printers.

HP heralds the labels as clear and simple to read, but for the LaserJet P4515, that is likely to raise as many questions as it is answers. For example, shouldn't printing on both sides of the paper cut paper consumption by 50 percent, rather than the 25 percent claimed by HP? That depends on the proportion of single-page documents that you print.

The device's Instant-On technology is said to yield up to 50 percent energy savings - but the little asterisk suggests that that, too, depends: in this case it's compared to products that use traditional fusing, but buyers will need to know whether their existing printers have a traditional fuser to figure out their savings.

Indeed, "It depends" is Hieronymi's stock answer to many questions, including whether it is more environmentally friendly to continue using an 11-year-old HP LaserJet 4 plus or to discard it, replacing it with a newer model.

What questions like that depend on is something HP plans to address with a carbon footprint calculator it will put online at the end of June. The

calculator will take into account the new and old printers' electricity consumption, and also the source of the electricity: Norway's use of hydroelectric power means electricity consumed there generates only 100 grams of carbon dioxide per kilowatt-hour, compared to 850g/kW/h in China, where coal-fired generators are more common, said Hieronymi.

As it reduces its printers' energy consumption, HP wants to increase the level of recycled materials they contain three-fold by 2011, with those materials coming primarily from old HP printers.

That's now becoming possible because HP has spent the past four or five years redesigning its printers "for recyclability," as the Eco Highlights label of the P4515 puts it, using far fewer kinds of plastic. The new Deskjet D2545 is one of the first fruits of that work: Five-sixths of the plastic it contains is recycled.

Google Health Goes Live

Google Health is live.

After months of speculation, the search engine giant on Monday unveiled its health-related Web site, Google Health.

Users can now log in to the service at google.com/health to import their medical records, fill prescriptions, and get lab results, set up text-based pill alerts, keep track of immunizations, and get pertinent news alerts, the company announced during an event at its Mountain View, Calif. headquarters.

Partners include Walgreens, CVS Long Drugs pharmacies, the American Heart Association (AHA), Cleveland Clinic, and Quest Diagnostics, among others.

Users can opt to share their information with partners. If someone shares data with the AHA, for example, AHA will import information from a profile to fill out a survey on how likely it is that someone will have a heart attack in the next year, cutting down on steps.

Sharing at this point, however, is all or nothing. Patients cannot opt to share some information, but hide other bits of data. That functionality will likely be added, but Google thoughts users had been waiting long enough and wanted to be able to unveil it sooner or later, according to a spokesman.

Google stressed that the information entered into Google Health will remain completely private. When asked whether that information might be aggregated, Google said that any information that is shared will be done so in a way that is not identifiable. For example, Google might say that 10 percent of diabetics who are Google Health users had a flu shot in the last six months.

In terms of connecting that will other Google offerings, Google will import any contacts in Google Health into your Gmail contact list.

"What absolutely will not be the case - no Google Health user will ever find their health information as search results on Google," a spokesman said. "That information is yours and only you have access to it."

"The service is already very powerful, [but] we realize this is just the beginning," said Marissa Mayer, vice president of search and user products at Google. "There are literally thousands of additional partnerships that need to be performed."

Google will also publish its API for Google Health so that developers can create optional applications for Google Health.

The company is also partnering with the Cleveland Clinic to launch a Walk for Google widget. People can keep track of their walking over the next 15 weeks, and those who achieve a certain point will be able to vote for what charity to which Google will donate $100,000. It is part of "a broader wellness campaign to get our users walking, getting them out," Mayer said.

Also at Monday's event, Google announced that its Image Search offering will soon include photo-based advertisements. Just as web searches from Google.com produce text advertisements on the right-hand side of the results page, Image searches will also produce ads.

There is a "direct connection" between image search and commerce, said R.J. Pittman, Google product management director. "If we can align the nature of the images from the advertisers with the nature of the images from Image Search, it will help users find more of what they're looking for. You'll see that these renderings show a fairly seamless user experience rather than just a stack of ads across the top."

No word on when that feature will debut.

Hold Off on Google Health

Google yesterday opened its Google Health site to the public. The service holds real promise to help people take control of their health records, as does a similar offering from Microsoft called HealthVault. They could also help streamline health care and contain costs. But until two major privacy concerns are fixed, I have to suggest holding off on using either one.

The first real problem is that HIPAA, the law that strictly governs how health care companies must safeguard health records under their control, doesn't extend to Google or Microsoft for these services. So while both companies appear to be careful and correct with their privacy policies, there isn't any law ensuring they continue to do the right thing.

Second, both systems currently allow access with an existing Google or Windows Live ID account- the same one that's used for Hotmail or Gmail. Meaning that if you take the obvious and simple route and use an existing Webmail account to sign up for either service, anyone you've ever sent e-mail already has the username, and would only have to guess your password to gain access to all your health records stored in the service.

For more information, take a look at a Privacy Watch column I recently wrote on the subject. And if you do decide to try either service, be sure to create a separate Google or Windows Live account just for the health records.

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